WHITE HOUSE WORKERS
HISTORY PROJECT

Frequently Asked Questions

ABOUT RESIDENCE STAFF

How many presidents relied on the labor of enslaved people at the White House?

Several presidents relied on enslaved labor to fill vital household positions at the White House until the 1860s including: Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, James Monroe, John Quincy Adams, Andrew Jackson, Martin Van Buren, John Tyler, James K. Polk, and Zachary Taylor. While President George Washington did not live at the White House (it was not completed until 1800, several years after his presidency ended), he also relied on enslaved labor in his New York and Philadelphia households.

Do workers live at the White House?

Today the Executive Residence staff typically does not live onsite, but that hasn't always been the case. Throughout White House history, it was common for workers to live near their workspace. In the early 1800s, free and enslaved workers often lived and worked in rooms on the Ground Floor, gardeners lived in a cottage on the White House Grounds, and coachmen lived above the Stables (the Stables later became garages). Until the mid-1900s, workers such as housekeepers and valets slept on the Third Floor of the White House to be closer to the president and first lady.

How many people are on the Residence Staff?

Today, the Residence Staff includes around 80-90 people, including butlers, maids, housekeepers, chefs, cooks, doormen, florists, curators, electricians, plumbers, storekeepers, engineers, and others. Early presidential households were much smaller, and staff size has expanded over time.

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Who pays the White House staff?

Payment of White House staff has changed over time. In the 1800s, presidents and first ladies paid their household staff themselves, and many slave-owning presidents used enslaved labor to save money. Over time, many roles became government positions and by the early 1900s, the United States government began paying the Residence Staff. Today, most of the Residence Staff are federal workers.

How do you get a Residence Staff job?

White House positions are not advertised like traditional job openings, instead many are filled with recommendations from friends and family members on staff.

Are Residence Staff positions political?

Residence Staff positions are not limited to terms and are non-partisan or not affiliated with any political party. Therefore, many workers serve several presidents and first families and create continuity at the White House. Residence Staff work through presidential transitions, both expected and unexpected, to keep the house running smoothly.

How have Residence Staff jobs changed over time?

The roles and responsibilities of the Residence Staff have changed over time to meet the evolving needs of the president and first family. Some roles that were very important in the 1800s and early 1900s are no longer necessary. For example, coachmen gave way to chauffeurs as the primary mode of presidential transportation transitioned from horse and carriage to automobiles. Other roles moved to different departments. While doorkeepers and other staff members historically provided presidential protection, the Secret Service became the official protective detail at the White House in 1901. See our Department Overview chart to learn more about how jobs at the White House have evolved.

Are there requirements to hold a Residence Staff position?

Members of the White House Residence Staff are highly skilled professionals in their respective fields. White House workers are highly dedicated public servants and famously private – much of their job relies upon discretion and trust.

Who is in charge of the White House Residence Staff?

Today, the chief usher is the general manager of the building, overseeing construction and renovation projects, maintenance, food service, as well as the administrative, fiscal, and personnel functions of the residence. The chief usher manages the White House Residence Staff of approximately 90-100 people, consisting of butlers, maids, housekeepers, chefs, cooks, doormen, florists, curators, electricians, plumbers, storekeepers, engineers, and others.

Do Residence Staff members wear uniforms?

Some Residence Staff members wear different kinds of uniforms depending on their job. For example, engineers or carpenters may wear work attire suitable for their jobs, while butlers often wear tuxedos for formal dinners. In the late 1700s and 1800s, many highly visible members of presidential households (such as coachmen, butlers, and waiters) wore livery, or matching uniforms that used colors associated with the president's family. For example, President George Washington had many of his servants wear matching red and white coats.

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ABOUT THE PROJECT

Who is included in the White House Workers History Project?

The White House Workers History Project (WHWHP) does not feature political staff who served in the East and West Wings; instead, it brings the lesser-known stories of non-partisan workers to the forefront.

At this time, WHWHP includes domestic household staff, as well as workers on the grounds and in the stables and garage. Today, this non-partisan workforce is known as the Executive Residence staff. To respect the privacy of former staff, the project includes only deceased workers. If you know of an individual who fits this framework but is not featured on our website, please contact us. This project is a work in progress and research is ongoing.

How accurate is the birthplace and burial location map in the database?

Both birth and burial places are based upon existing documentation, which varies in terms of specificity. Sometimes, we are able to closely identify the town or county, while in other cases, we can only identify the country of someone's birth. For many of our worker biographies, burial and birthplace are unknown at this time.

When it comes to mapping, the GeoNames software on our website places an individual's birth and burial locations in the geographic center of that locality, not the actual address where they were born or buried. For example, if someone was born in Atlanta, Georgia, the GeoNames software places their precise location as the geographic center of Atlanta, not their actual birthplace address. If an individual was born or buried in a country that no longer exists (ex. Prussia), we have chosen to use the modern equivalent (Germany) for this category to allow for modern mapping.

How did you categorize race for this project?

The White House Workers History Project relies on the U.S. Census Bureau's updated guidelines for collecting demographic data related to race and ethnicity published in 2024. Adhering to these categories, this project identifies this person as Black or African American; however, there is documentation or other evidence suggesting that they were multiracial or mixed race. It is important to recognize that historical terms such as "mulatto" and "colored" are problematic, as these reflect the document writer's views and the historical period more than the individual's preferences or identity. Whenever practical, we have tried to include this information within the biographies. Please see our Statement on Harmful Language, and feel free to contact us to share any questions or concerns.

What sources did you use to conduct this research?

Our team relied upon a variety of sources including family and oral histories, government records, newspapers, staff memoirs, presidential papers, census data, and more to write biographies of White House workers. We are grateful for our partners, including presidential sites and libraries, documentary editing projects, historic cemeteries, and independent scholars across the country for sharing research materials and insights with us, and for our White House Workers History Project Community Council for providing valuable input and guidance.

I have more information about a White House worker/ a correction to a biography- how can I share it with you?

We would love to hear from you! Research is ongoing and we welcome any and all contributions to this project. Please reach out to us here.